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SUBJECT: VENEZUELA REFERENDUM UPDATE, AUGUST 12

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor,
for Reason 1.5(d)

Summary

1. (C) National Electoral Council (CNE) director Jorge Rodriguez made clear that the referendum campaign officially closes at midnight August 12, as was initially decided by the CNE, despite Chavez's Comando Maisanta's request to extend the deadline so its campaign closing event could be held August 13. The CNE approved the preliminary announcement on August 15 of the results based on the automatic transmission of the votes. Organization of American States (OAS) mission leader Valter Pecly Moreira reiterated his confidence in the secrecy of the vote and in the referendum preparation to the Venezuelan press and separately to the Ambassador. The Carter Center Director Jennifer McCoy also told reporters its observation team was pleased with the process so far. CNE director Rodriguez said that the second fingerprint machine test finished August 11 had once again proven successful, but opposition experts continue being doubtful. Venezuelan religious leaders (Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant) issued a joint call for Venezuelans to maintain the peace, vote and respect the results of the August 15 referendum. President Hugo Chavez's advisor for North America and an MVR deputy told Poloffs the outlook for the election and afterwards was good for Chavez. End summary.

Campaign Closes

2. (U) National Electoral Council (CNE) director Jorge Rodriguez made clear that the referendum campaign officially closes at midnight August 12, as was initially decided by the CNE, despite Chavez's Comando Maisanta's request to extend the deadline so its campaign closing event could be held August 13. Instead, Comando Maisanta will hold various closing events in every state throughout Venezuela consisting of caravans and public gatherings. In Caracas, the "No" caravan is scheduled to end with a public gathering in front of Miraflores August 12 in the afternoon. The opposition campaign closing event is also culminating in a march that will gather on the public highway in Caracas. In the 48 hours before the referendum, political parties are prohibited from campaigning through the media, in the streets or by distributing campaign material.

Results to be Announced

3. (U) The CNE approved the preliminary announcement on August 15 of the results based on the automatic transmission of the votes. CNE director Rodriguez explained that the official results should be issued around August 19, after 12,351 voting acts are certified by the CNE. The results of the voting acts signed by the president of the voting tables will be compared to the electronically transmitted results before being certified.

OAS Representative Statements

4. (U) Organization of American States (OAS) mission leader Valter Pecly Moreira issued a statement reiterating his confidence in the referendum preparation process until now August 11. Pecly praised the technical audits, especially those involving CANTV, calling them well done and trustworthy. He noted that the OAS will not implement its own quick count system nor announce results, but working within the CNE regulations, OAS observers will make their own evaluations hoping that the OAS results coincide with those

of the CNE. Pecly told reporters that he and the OAS mission were convinced that the referendum vote was secret and would remain so.

15. (C) Pecly told the Ambassador he was pleased with the National Electoral Council's (CNE) performance, expressing confidence in the technological systems on August 12. Pecly described the environment as peaceful, mostly because both sides are sure they are going to win. Pecly said the opposition and pro-GOV CNE directors are working well together in private, though are conflictive when speaking publicly to please their constituencies. Pecly believed he gained the trust of the CNE, and has been successful in a number of areas, including pumping up the number of OAS observers and getting the Carter Center observers all of their credentials. The Ambassador noted the importance of international observers to be ready when the polls closed to support transparency in the process, lest delays in the vote count lead to violence.

Carter Center Observations

16. (U) Seated with former Presidents Alfonsin and Carazo, Carter Center Director Jennifer McCoy told reporters August 12 that the Carter Center mission has received the support and access from the National Electoral Council (CNE) it needs and that it has been satisfied with the process so far. She said the Carter Center will deploy its observers in teams of two to various Venezuelan states August 13 and will use various mechanisms as they observe everything from the opening to the closing of the polls and the transmitting of results. McCoy said the Carter Center agrees with the CNE rule not to announce any preliminary results or projections before the first CNE bulletin is released. Likely, she said, former Presidents Carter would give a press conference with OAS Secretary General Gaviria August 16. Asked by a reporter if the Carter Center believes the referendum will proceed in a fair and transparent manner, McCoy said no one can give guarantees, but that based on what the Carter Center has observed thus far, it has confidence in the process.

Worries Put to Rest

17. (U) CNE director Rodriguez said that the second fingerprint machine test finished August 11 had once again proven successful. He announced that all the voting machines are now programmed and should be delivered to the voting centers August 12-13. Rodriguez reported a 40 second delay between the time the first documents are presented for voting and fingerprints are taken until the results are returned. He told reporters this meant that more than 8 million people could vote (8 million possible voters constitutes under 60% of the total registered voters). The opposition's Coordinadora Democratica telecommunication experts were not present at the fingerprint machine tests August 11. Coordinadora expert Luis Baez Duarte quarreled with Rodriguez's conclusion, saying the test sample was too small. Baez said the Coordinadora also objected to the millions spend for the system.

Religious Influence

18. (U) Venezuelan religious leaders (Catholic, Jewish, and Protestant) issued a joint call for Venezuelans to maintain the peace, vote and respect the results of the August 15 referendum. They also called upon political leaders, both Chavista and opposition, to prevent any actions that might generate violence from their supporters. Although they maintain good relations, the joint statement by Archbishop Baltazar Porras, President of the Catholic Episcopal

Conference of Venezuela; Pynchas Brener, principal rabbi of the Ashkenazi Caracas; and Reverend Samuel Olsen, President of the Evangelical Council, is unusual. At the same time, Pope John Paul II mentioned Venezuela in his weekly audience from the Vatican expressing his hopes, "that a climate of peace, serenity and reconciliation reign" in Venezuela.

Chavez Advisor on Possibilities and Post-Referendum Plans

19. (C) Chavez's advisor on North American issues in the Office of the Presidency (and U.S./French/British citizen) Alexander Main told Poloff August 11 that everyone in the GOV, including himself, has been focused on the "No" campaign, but that once Chavez wins, the GOV will be able to focus more on their jobs and governing the country. Main asserted that there would be no violence because the Venezuelans are tired of it. Main said one of his principle responsibilities now is to advise Chavez on how to achieve better relations with the U.S.

110. (C) Main said if the GOV won, it would continue with the "misiones" but would deepen their initiatives for poverty reduction, infrastructure, and fighting corruption. Asked if these plans included peace and reconciliation efforts, he said sure but didn't elaborate. Main said Chavez thrives on the crisis but has plans for the country that he would like to carry out. Main said the hoped that when Chavez wins the referendum, the opposition will finally allow him to govern.

111. (C) Asked what the GOV will do post referendum if Chavez loses, Main said Chavez won't lose. Main questioned if Poloff had seen the number of people at the pro-government march August 8. Pressed, he said Chavez would accept the results from the National Electoral Council (CNE) as he had after the signature repairs in May 2004 (which he said was a "real psychological blow") and immediately begin campaigning, which Chavez is good at.

MVR Deputy Offers Outlook

112. (C) Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) National Assembly Deputy Luis Acuna told Poloff August 11 that whoever wins the referendum needs to win by a large margin to establish legitimacy. Acuna said the polls indicated Chavez was going to win; however, he did not appear confident. If Chavez were to win the referendum, Acuna believes, the President would choose a policy of reconciliation and not retaliation. Acuna complained that the opposition abandoned the National Assembly as the legitimate forum for settling political disagreements and attacked the 2003 OAS talks as usurpation. The referendum would establish the real balance of forces in the country and, if Chavez won, allow the political debate to return to the Assembly.
Shapiro

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